DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 127 865 HE 008 200

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TITLE Functional Tensions in the University.
PUB DATE [75]
NOTE 20p.
AVAILABLE FROM Division of Education, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas 78285

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Changing Attitudes; *Educational Objectives; *Higher Education; Research; *Role Perception; Teaching; *Universities

ABSTRACT

A possible analysis of the functions of the university is that it is both a cultural and an institutional function. The cultural function centers on the pursuit of meaning, the institutional function on the acquisition of the material resources needed for this pursuit. Moreover, a great many future possibilities are open to the university once it is realized that its cultural function is not limited to the pursuit of knowledge but encompasses the full range of meaning. On the basis of this analysis, current developments in the university can be interpreted. Teaching and research contribute to both these functions, and this gives rise to an enduring tension in the university. This tension is not likely to be dissolved by the elimination of either the cultural or the institutional function, nor is the performance of the institutional function likely to be effortless in the foreseeable future. Even though some aspects of this tension will be reduced by the growth of alternate forms of postsecondary education, coping with functional tension, especially in the activities of teaching and research, will continue to be a necessary task for those engaged in university work. (Author)

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Functional Tensions in the University

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FUNCTIONAL TENSIONS IN THE UNIVERSITY

Abstract

An analysis of the functions of the university is a necessary step in evaluating certain current practices in the university. The traditional description of the university as an institution whose function is teaching and research is inadequate, especially when joined to the claim that these functions revolve around the pursuit of knowledge. A more satisfactory formulation is to state that the university has both a cultural and an institutional function. The cultural function centers on the pursuit of meaning, the institutional function on the acquisition of the material resources needed for this pursuit. Moreover a great many future possibilities are open to the university once it is realized that its cultural function is not limited to the pursuit of knowledge, but encompasses the full range of meaning.

On the basis of this analysis, current developments in the university can be interpreted. Teaching and research contribute to both these functions, and this gives rise to an enduring tension in the university. This tension is not likely to be dissolved by the elimination of either the cultural or the institutional function, nor is the performance of the institutional function likely to be effortless in the foreseeable future. Even though some aspects of this tension will be reduced by the growth of alternate forms of postsecondary education, coping with functional tension, especially in the activities of teaching and research, will continue to be a necessary task for those engaged in university work.

Traditionally the functions of the university have been described as teaching and research. In the standard formulation the university is stated to be an institution committed to the pursuit and communication of knowledge through teaching and research. However contemporary developments in the university challenge the continued adequacy of analyzing its functions in this way.

With the appearance of external degree programs and certification of life experiences, the place of teaching in higher education is no longer clear. Even in institutions that follow more traditional procedures the importance of teaching is suspect when the positions of top academic status are awarded largely on the basis of performance in research and when the occupants of such positions are required to do little teaching and perhaps then only in graduate seminars which demand no special preparation. This anomaly, that the more successful a university teacher is the less teaching required, is replicated by another anomaly, that the students who are most difficult to teach, the undergraduates, are assigned to the least experienced teachers, the teaching assistants. On the other hand, the importance of research is challenged by the existence in the university of academic departments which cater almost exclusively to certification needs. The role of research is also made questionable when in response to budgetary constraints faculty productivity is measured by the student-credit hours a course generates. Marketability rather than scholarly advancement then becomes the criterion for faculty retention and program development. Also the triviality of some published research makes it difficult to claim this as a function of the university.

A different challenge to the traditional functions of the unviersity is posed by some suggested reforms of the university, especially those that were

heard during the years of student unrest in the late 60s and early 70s and which reappear whenever there is reason to notice the scholarly isolation and neutrality of the university. The demand that the university become politically active or that the university protect the rights of its various constituencies or that the university become a place for the formation of community, all of these are demands that the university address itself to functions that go beyond teaching and research.

These challenges to the traditional functions of the university suggest the timeliness of returning to the question, what are the functions of the university. Until that question is settled, evaluations of current developments in the university lack a firm achorage. Holding to the traditional functions of teaching and research can either prevent the university from investigating innovative futures or it can protect the university from meretricious solutions to its current problems. What is the obligation of faculty to teach courses that are limited in their scope and pedestrian in their sophistication? At what point does marketability become dysfunctional as a criterion for either research or teaching? Should research dominate the work of the university and the task of advancing the populace to levels of learning increasingly beyond literarcy be relegated to the community colleges? A necessary step in answering these and like questions involves determining the functions of the university.

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE UNIVERSITY

Analyzing the functions of an institution such as a university involves explaining the contributions that the recurring activities of the institution make to the development or maintenance of the system within which the institution operates. In explaining the logical characteristics of functional analysis Carl G. Hempel (1959, p. 278) states, "functional analysis seeks to

understand a behavior pattern or a sociocultural institution by determining the role it plays in keeping the given system in proper working order or maintaining it as a going concern." A functional analysis thus examines three different items: a set of activities, a system within which the activities take place, and some need of the system which is satisfied by the activities in question so that the system remains in adequate or effective or proper working order. Hence the question, what are the functions of the university, is incomplete and cannot be answered in that form. The functions of the university are relative to some system within which the activities of the university have effects. Thus before doing a functional analysis of the university a system within which the university operates must be specified.

The two most likely candidates for the systemic location of the university are the life-experience of an individual and the society which supports the university. But both of these choices seem to render a functional analysis of the university inescapably arbitrary since an individual or a society can present a great variety of needs to be satisfied by the activities of the university. For an individual the university can function as a source of entertainment or as place to take walks or as a dating bureau. For a society the university can function as a sorting device for the allocation of social roles or as an instrument for raising property values in a particular locale. Clearly, given the proper circumstances both individuals and society can discover functions in the activities of the university that seem quite peculiar and extraneous to the work of the university. But the very suggestion that some functions attributable to the university might be peculiar and extraneous suggests that a functional analysis of the university is not completely arbitrary. The problem is to ground the analysis in such a way that the functions assigned to the university can be judged to be more or less harmonious with its institutional

character while at the same time recognizing that the university is an artificial creation without a natural teleology.

THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY

Consider the human heart. No logical necessity compels us to speak only of the heart's function in the body. Still without further explanation there is not much sense in asking, what is the function of the heart with reference to Philadelphia. The functions attributed to the heart are limited in two ways. First, unless the heart is found within the environment provided by a living body it is not doing much of anything. Secondly, the heart is capable of performing only certain types of activities. Both the environmental requirements for the heart to be active and the constraints imposed by its capabilities limit the functional uses of the heart. This suggests that the environment the university needs for its activities and its suitability for certain activities will, if not strictly limit, at least discriminate among the functions that an individual or a society assigns to the university.

What then is the environment that makes possible the activities of the university? Among the recurrent activities of the university are those classified as intellectual performances: explaining, proving, remembering, organizing, speculating, arguing, inquiring, etc. These are not the only activities of the university since the university also, among other things, owns property, houses students, and purchases material goods. Nor are these activities unique to the university since other institutions sponsor intellectual performances. Rather the point here is that a university without intellectual activities is either inconceivable or a joke. Hence the environment necessary for the activities of the university must be an environ-

ment that, whatever else it does, makes possible intellectual performance. Such an environment contains many features, among them the social institutions that favor reasoned discourse and a value system which associates intellectual activity with human excellence. But the fundamentally necessary condition for intellectual activities is meaning. Intellectual, activities are, first of all, symbol-using and symbol-making processes. The symbols used in intellectual activities stand for something other than themselves and in that sense they have meaning. The dependency of intellectual activities on symbolization thus makes meaning a necessary environment for at least these activities of the university. A second way in which meaning is necessary for the university derives from understanding 'meaning' as that is significant. According to this account "the meaning of anything is said to have been grasped when it has been understood as related to other things or as having a place in some system as a whole." (Ogden and Richards, 1946) The activities of explaining, demonstrating, organizing, and inquiring relate to meaning in this sense because they seek to attribute meaning to something or presuppose that something has meaning because of its consequences within a particular system. In both these ways the university depends on meaning much as economic institutions depend on the exchange of goods and political institutions on the exercise of authority.

This dependence of the university on meaning is implied in referring to the university as a cultural institution. One way of understanding culture is to view it as a system of meaning. Such, for example, is the approach that Talcott Parsons (1973, p.12) takes in his general theory of action: "Culture consists in codified systems of meaningful symbols and those aspects of action directly oriented to problems of the meaningfulness of such symbols." Other institutions besides the university deal with the problem of meaning. But the relationship of the university to meaning would

appear to differ from that of a church or theatre or museum. Determining this difference provides a basis for discriminating among the functions that can be assigned to the university: some functions relate to the activities which are distinctive of the university vis-a-vis other cultural institutions.

THE DISTINGUISHING ACTIVITIES OF THE UNIVERSITY

The relationship of the university to meaning can be characterized in four different ways: the type of meaning on which the university focuses, the level at which the university approaches meaning, the manner in which the university pursues meaning, and that which the university does with the meaning it attains.

The first of these, the type of meaning, is the usual basis for distinguishing the university from other cultural institutions. Thus the university is said to pursue knowledge through empirical research or objective inquiry or scientific investigation. But not only does such a characterization preclude the university from pursuing forms of inquiry that are not strictly cognitive, it also confuses the contemporary version of the university with necessary features of the university as such. In the past the university has sometimes served as handmaiden to the church and conscience to the king. These roles may be eschewed by the contemporary American university simply because of its temporal location in a society which places a high premium on cognitive pursuits. Rationality happens to be important for productive and profitable economic activity, and the extension of knowledge generates new possibilities for rational action. If economic pursuits are important enough to a society for it to place a premium on competence, i.e., on the ability to make choices based on knowledge, then the cognitive dimension of culture will be the cultural component that receives the most emphasis. But given a society in which religious

orientations or moral concerns are dominant, the insitutions of higher learning could well focus on cultural components other than scientific knowledge and propositions of cognitive significance.

This is an important point when evaluating suggested reforms of the university. If the present cognitive focus of the university is necessary to the university's identity as a cultural institution, then efforts to make the university a therapeutic community or a moral force in society must be denied. As long as the university remains isolated from other cultural concerns by its commitment to cognitive pursuits the responsibility devolves upon the students for protesting the seriously objectionable practices of society and for shaping a personal environment which is congenial to human existence. But if an institution of higher learning can pursue religious, moral, and expressive concerns and still preserve its identity, if a university can remain a university while embracing forms of inquiry that do not center on empirical research and scientific objectivity, then the university is free to explore a great many innovative futures. The present model of university work then becomes a temporal accident and not a logical necessity. However this implies that the university cannot be distinguished from other cultural institutions by the type of meaning on which it focuses.

A more satisfactory way to distinguish the university from other cultural institutions is first, by the level on which it approaches meaning. The description of the university as an institution of higher learning is an acknowledgement that only certain levels of meaning are interesting to the university. The university pursues meanings that are important because they are strategically located within the general schemes that organize thought and inquiry, either completing the frames of reference

within which anything becomes significant or recasting those frames of reference. In pursuing these meanings the university expands the area of meaningful discourse and liberates inquiry from its present limitations. As a cultural institution the university engages in activities that extend the very possibilities of meaning itself and in this way the university promotes the developing history of meaning.

The manner in which the university pursues meaning further distinguishes it from other cultural institutions. The university seeks a compelling expression of meaning, compelling not because of the ritual surrounding it or the force of authority imposing it but because of the competence of the inquiry that generated the meaning. To guarantee this competence the university conducts the pursuit of meaning as a public activity which is guided by the canons of inquiry that have been established by the scholarly community. In this way the university attempts to certify the meanings it expresses as being the result of the best available scholarship and to that extent trustworthy.

A final distinguishing characteristic of the university as a cultural institution is its commitment to a widespread dissemination of those meanings which it has certified. In this the university differs from research institutes which are like the university in that they too extend and certify meaning. However no other institution of higher learning addresses as wide a public as the university, a public which includes those seeking either the substance or certification of advanced learning, those preparing for professional practice, those who will act as intellectuals in society, those who are responsible for governmental and corporate policies, those who will work as scholars. In short, the university is a teaching institution, even though it communicates meaning to the public in ways other than teaching. Also not every act of communication has as its content those meanings which are of special interest to the university since some pre-

paration is needed before the meanings which have been recently certified can be apprehended. But in widely communicating the meanings that it has secured and certified the university diatinguishes itself as a cultural inatitution that teaches..

THE CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FUNCTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY

These characteristics of the university mark out its capabilities as a cultural institution. The university relates to meaning by extending, certifying, and communicating it. These are the distinguishing activities of the university and along with the environment that makes them possible, they place constraints on the functions that can be assigned to the university by an individual or by a society. If the university is to continue the activities that distinguish it as a cultural institution, then the functional needs to which the university responds cannot be such as to inhibit the extension, certification, and communication of meaning. Admittedly this is a very weak constraint because it rests on a hypothetical condition. Good reasons can be found to justify a society's support of an institution that relates to meaning as the university does. But against a functional assignment that results in altering the university's relation to meaning there is little point in objecting to it for that reason alone. No absolute need dictates that the university must maintain its distinguishing activities.

A better course of action is to use the distinctive capabilities of the university as a basis for discriminating among the functions assigned to the university. In general the functional needs for which the university is a fit instrument of response are those that relate to cultural interests and concerns. Under certain conditions the good operating condition of an individual or society depends on special attention to culture. For example, if the meaning accumulated by a society has become so vast that it stands in danger of being lost, then the need exists for devices that codify and

organize meaning. Or if traditional meanings are no longer serviceable in an individual's attempt to cope with the problems he faces, then a need exists for locating new meanings. But whatever the conditions that generate a need for explicit attention to culture, the university constitutes a response to the problem of institutionalizing cultural interests and concerns and articulating these into the life of an individual and into society. This might be called the cultural function of the university since in responding to the need for the extension, certification, and communication of meaning the university is identified as a type of cultural institution.

Other functional requirements relating to cultural interests and concerns are satisfied by the university not so much because it is a cultural institution as because it is an institution. The need for the extension, certification, and communication of meaning could be satisfied in a variety of ways, but an efficient arrangement of doing this is provided by the institutional form of the university. Ministering to the cultural needs of society or individuals does not in itself provide the material resources that make either the accomplishment of this task possible or that sustain those who are engaged in it. The people who work on the problems of meaning have their own need for material comfort and social status. Moreover their work is facilitated by arrangements that bring them in contact with others who are similarly engaged. They also stand in need of institutional protection since their work may not be immediately productive and may produce results that are disturbing to society. The institutional form of the university addresses all of these problems. It provides a setting in which scholars find occupational roles, social status, material support for their work, access to colleagues, and protection for work that will bear either distant or controversial fruit. Making all this possible might be called the institutional function of the university. In performing this function the university also addresses cultural interests and concerns, but in-

directly by providing the arrangements that facilitate the pursuit of meaning.

FUNCTIONAL TENSION IN THE UNIVERSITY

Some of the contemporary tensions in the university and anomalies in its practices can be explained by the interplay of the cultural and institutional functions. Some activities of the university contribute to both these functions. Teaching, for example, is a way of communicating meaning and also a way of commanding the material resources needed by the university. As a basis for charging tuition and demanding public subsidy teaching contributes to the institutional function of the university. But as a way in which the university communicates meaning teaching shares in the cultural identity of the university. Research has the same dual personality. On the one hand research is the extension and certification of meaning, hence a cultural pursuit. On the other hand research that addresses particular social, economic, or political concerns provides a basis for requesting material support for the researcher and the university. The schizophrenic character of teaching and research makes them inadequate expressions of the functions of the university. Rather the university has a cultural and an institutional function to each of which teaching and research contribute. Tension arises when teaching and research seem to be properly located for the integrity of the university in its cultural function but seem to be most serviceable for the survival of the university when contributing to its institutional function. In each of these locations different criteria are used to evaluate teaching and research. As related to the pursuit of meaning the judgment passed on teaching and research focuses on what these activities are in themselves. But as related to the acquisition of material resources the judgment bears on how well these

activities fulfill the instrumental purposes to which they are subordinated.

This functional tension is not easily resolved. The distinctive identity of the university as a cultural institution depends on the contribution that teaching and research make to the cultural function. Moreover the intrinsic worth of teaching and research is most completely realized when these activities participate in the cultural function of the university. Research is most free and teaching most educational when they are not dominated by extrinsic purposes but are focused on the pursuit of meaning. And yet while a world is imaginable in which the university would not have to rely on research and teaching to obtain material support and in which neither individuals nor society would subvert these activities to strictly utilitarian purposes, that world is not a realistic possibility. The most persuasive reason the university has to justify its demands for material support is its service to those cultural concerns that are keenly felt by individuals and society. Research can be very useful, and often is most apparently useful, when it does not generate the kind of meaning that is of primary interest to the university. Likewise teaching that is mostly passing on of information and training in skills is easily defended because of its usefulness to a variety of individual and societal needs, even though such teaching would not communicate the kind of meaning the university explores in its cultural function. When contributing to the institutional function of the university the standards used to judge teaching and research are those that measure its marketability. Good research no matter how trivial, is research that is published or that leads to grants and consultantships. Good teaching is teaching that produces consumer satisfaction or that generates a high number of student-credit hours. Thus the institutional function of the university emphasizes those varieties of teaching and research that are clearly seen by individuals and society to be of use to their own purposes.

RESPONSE TO FUNCTIONAL TENSION

There are two ways of dealing with this functional tension in the university. First it can be dissolved either by eliminating one of the functions or by making its performance so effortless that its demands are no longer problematic. Failing that, the only other recourse is to cope with the tension by balancing off the demands posed by each function.

Dissolving the functional tension by eliminating the cultural function of the university is not a viable option since fulfilling that function gives the university its distinguishing identity as a cultural institution. Moreover the problems involved in performing this function do not at the moment seem to derive from intellectual stagnation. Given the proper resources the cultural life of the present day American university seems vital enough. Thus dissolving the functional tension in the university seems to be a task focused on the institutional function. Here again it does not seem opportune to eliminate this function since the institutional form of the university still seems serviceable as an aid to extending, certifying, and communicating meaning. Hence the only realistic possibility for dissolving functional tension in the university is to render performance of the institutional function effortless. In fact, this is one way of describing the good administrator: he or she is a person who so successfully addresses the institutional function of the university that it is never perceived as problematic and never challenges the cultural function. But recalcitrant governmental bodies and a public interested in a return on its investment in higher education make it unlikely that very many administrators will be successful in this way.

Thus coping with functional tension appears to be the prospect that faces most of those involved in university work. Coping, first of all, means recognizing that the characteristic activities of the university

address more than one functional requirement. Coping further entails adjudicating among the demands of the cultural and institutional functions so that neither is seriously neglected. None of this promises to be an easy task, especially since the teaching faculty and the administration assume primary responsibility for different functions: the faculty for the cultural function and the administration for the institutional function. Coping with functional tension often comes to mean the faculty coping with the administration and vice versa.

As a final note to this analysis, let us consider some of the instances in which functional tension currently appears in the university. There is, first, the anomaly mentioned at the outset that the more successful a teacher becomes the less teaching required. There is as well the reticence of established faculty to meet with large classes of undergraduates. Both of these practices can be justified as appropriate responses to the cultural function of the university. Not all teaching sponsored by the university addresses the cultural function. Some courses are strictly utilitarian in their purposes: the students are purchasing credits as an investment in later social benefits and the teacher is justifying the budget allotted to the department. To those who have achieved eminence in extending and certifying meaning teaching such courses may indeed seem like an abdication of their professional calling.

Even though the cultural function can be used to justify neglect of some forms of teaching, this argument must be qualified in two ways. First, the cultural function of the university can also be used to criticize professors whose scholarly work is hurt by neglect of teaching. A criticism of this form looks at teaching in much the same way as Thorstein Veblen (1975, p. 12) who wrote, "The work of teaching properly belongs in the university only because and in so far as it incites and facilitates the university man's work of inquiry."

Secondly, under present circumstances no professor has a right to completely ignore the institutional function of the university, especially when such a professor is a very expensive faculty member. However teaching large undergraduate classes is not the only way in which the obligation to participate in the institutional function can be met. The professor might also be able to secure independent funding for research or the fame of the professor's work might be a valuable visual aid in the administration's appeal for alumni support. The point here is that though at times neglect of teaching can be justified, it is still incumbent upon a faculty member to contribute in some way to the university's institutional function.

A further note here is that the creation of community colleges softens this conflict between the cultural and the institutional function. With alternate forms of postsecondary education available to high school graduates the university is freer to concentrate on that style of teaching which is congenial to its cultural function. This further differentiation of postsecondary education allows the university to define more narrowly the type of meaning it wishes to communicate, thus enabling the university to identify more completely its teaching activities with the cultural function.

A second area in which there is need to cope with functional tension is the research sponsored by the university. Some research is profitable for the university even though it does not advance the history of meaning. Selecting research on the basis of its monetary return runs the risk of neglecting important forms of inquiry which do not promise financial gain. If government and industry are able to command the time and energies of the scholarly community the account of meaning offered by the university is likely to be skewed by political and economic utility. In that case the cultural function suffers because of solicitude for the institutional function. The matter is even more serious when it is the individual professor rather than the university who profits from timely research which generates remunerative consultantships.

Such a professor uses the office at the university to conduct a personal compaign for improved social and financial status but addresses neither the cultural nor the institutional function of the university.

The tension between the cultural and the institutional function will most certainly endure. Various and in some ways incompatible demands will be placed on the activities of teaching and research. The line between justifiable emphasis on one function and neglect of the other is difficult to trace. The responsibility for marking that line belongs to all who work in the university. In response to urging by the administration to pursue grants and to devise marketable programs of instruction, and in the face of attractive enticements from the business and political community, the individual scholar is responsible for protecting the cultural function from the encroachment of other interests. The extension, certification, and communication of meaning must take place according to its own logic. Likewise faced with the propensity of the faculty to luxuriate in the groves of academe the administration must insist that the institutional function is also proper to the work of the university. The cultural interests of individuals and society must be attended to by the scholarly community. Tension in the university is much like tension in human life: it can be a creative impulse or it can lead to neurosis. If the history of the American university is any indication, this functional tension has been beneficial. The demands of the institutional function have kept the university flexible and the demands of the cultural function have kept it solid. It appears that addressing both of these functions is for the university a creative response to tension.

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